

Rediscovering the Divine in Today's Cinematic Sagas

Believers in Hollywood are also spreading gospel metaphors and moral truths with 'Trojan Horse' films

There is perhaps no richer communal experience than that of telling stories. While the vehicles through which individuals exchange understanding have grown increasingly complex, the power of story to affect hearts and minds has remained constant. In today's culture, movies have become the most effective medium to not only inspire, but also transform.

Prior to 2004, faith and family films had garnered a reputation for mawkish storylines and poor production values. With the release of *The Passion of The Christ*, Mel Gibson and Icon Productions upended expectations by elevating the genre to an art form, and identified a receptive affinity among faith audiences that "primed the pump" for mainstream audiences to follow in order to reach the box-office critical mass.

The film struck a nerve within the church, and the nearly 190 million Americans who consider themselves Christian—both Protestant and Catholic. This previously unrecognized—and thereby underserved—new market also created a wave for others in Hollywood to replicate.

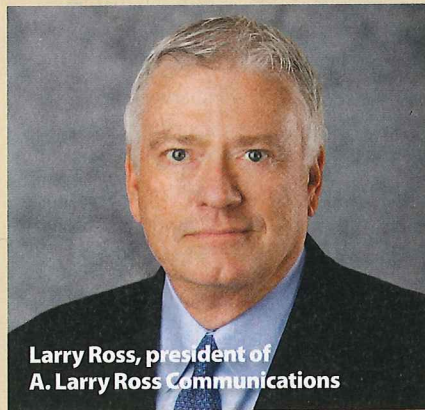
Fast-forward a decade, and media outlets as diverse as *Relevant* magazine and *The Daily Beast* proclaimed 2014 as "The Year of the Christian Movie." Indeed, numerous qualifying titles in that category were released, such as *Son of God*, *Noah*, *Exodus*, *Heaven Is for Real* and *God's Not Dead*, with more on the way this year. Some are based (albeit, at times, loosely) on the Bible, while others represent morally themed or religiously oriented films designed to reinforce and confirm strongly held biblical beliefs among the faith community.

Which begs the question "What is a Christian Movie?" Does good intent trump quality content? Do biblical themes transcend epic Bible adaptations? Can people of faith leverage truth in a storyline—even when not intentional or intended by a filmmaker—to start a spiritual conversation in their neighborhood or marketplace?

Just because a film is labeled "faith-based" does not guarantee success. Moviegoers expect and demand a storyline that not only challenges but also entertains. Some titles exhibiting a didactic, moralizing approach to the Christian

message do well with church audiences but fail to crossover to the mainstream.

Other movies incorporating authentic characters and uplifting storylines might be considered "faith light," but in a good way—celebrating a Christian worldview while not overtly preaching it. They also tap into emotions and



Larry Ross, president of
A. Larry Ross Communications

affect the heart—more than the brain—and it is out of the heart that actions spring.

Since Christian leaders and pastors have a ministry rather than a marketing mindset, they will support or endorse a film for one of two reasons: if it edifies their constituency or congregation or if it provides an outreach opportunity to the local community.

However, while providing publicity and marketing support of faith and family films for nearly two decades, I have realized there is a third "Trojan Horse" approach that includes projects in which spiritual themes are subtly woven into the very texture of a movie. Further, moral truths—even gospel metaphors—emerge as subtext, rather than overt messages, providing occasion for audiences to engage, explore and apply them according to their personal worldview.

The resulting impact is less about the answers given than the questions raised, and takes place not on the screen, but over coffee afterwards as believers discuss and interpret elements of the story with a friend who might never accompany them to church, but will go with them to the theater.

According to Barna Research, "From the injustice of slavery in *12 Years a Slave*, to the

effects of narcissism on our relationships in *Her*, to the idolatry of greed in *The Wolf of Wall Street* and *American Hustle*, many of (2013's) Best Picture nominations explored profoundly moral questions. For better or worse, movies are often considered to be significant societal influences."

Producers and directors who are Christians are becoming more talented, and studios that recognize the interest in and import of spiritual themes are more commonly releasing such films into the marketplace.

At the same time, fellow believers can be similarly open to Trojan Horse entertainment projects that contain spiritual messages or meaning—whether or not intended by the producer or director. A film should not be discounted merely because it isn't perceived or positioned as "Christian."

People outside the church are flocking to see today's tent pole blockbusters and independent releases. Many motion pictures—from *Interstellar* to *The Hunger Games* and *Iron Man*—have sometimes obvious but often oblique storylines that represent allegory to the gospel or address moral questions and inspirational themes that can provide a springboard for authentic spiritual dialogue using the cultural lexicon.

Filmmakers are among the guardians of the Zeitgeist who set the "spirit of the times." Guided by the Holy Spirit, people of faith who attend movies have an unprecedented opportunity to identify spiritual "ahas" or leverage the "divine moments" in movies their friends and neighbors are already attending—or go with them to the cinema.

Hollywood may unknowingly be doing the church a favor, as we "seize the day" and take what some may say is intended for evil, and use it for good—and for God.

LARRY ROSS is president of A. Larry Ross Communications, a full-service agency providing crossover media liaison at the intersection of faith and culture. With more than 38 years experience influencing public opinion, Ross' mission is to "restore faith in media," by providing Christian messages relevance and meaning in mainstream media. Follow him on Twitter @alarryross.